

**AFRICANA STUDIES 230/RELIGION 230**  
**CREOLE RELIGIONS OF THE CARIBBEAN**



**Spring 2007**

Prof. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert  
Chicago Hall 144  
Telephone: x5611  
e-mail: [liparavisini@vassar.edu](mailto:liparavisini@vassar.edu)

**Office Hours:**

Tuesdays and Thursdays 11:45 to 1:30  
And by appointment

**Course Description:**

The Africa-derived religions of the Caribbean region—Haitian Voodoo, Cuban Santeria, Jamaican Obeah, Rastafarianism, and others—are foundational elements in the cultural development of the islands of the region. This course examines their histories, systems of belief, liturgical practices, and pantheons of spirits, as well as their impact on the history, literature, and music of the region.

**Class Dynamics:** Classes will be based on dialogue, open discussion and specific student questions. Lectures will be provided occasionally to guide and inform discussion of particular concepts or texts but will not substitute for student participation. Therefore students are responsible for coming to class prepared, having read and/or viewed assigned materials, and ready to comment on them.

Students are responsible for bringing to my attention any problems they may encounter during the semester. This includes issues of comprehension, individual assignments or other concerns that may affect student performance.

## **Required Work:**

There are three types of written work required for class.

1. A series of brief responses (150 words each) to the readings that appear in **RED** on the syllabus. Look below for dates due. The responses are due by 5pm of the evening before class and should be posted on our Blackboard site. You are welcome to respond to any postings and are responsible for reading all your classmates' postings by class time.
2. A midterm paper (2000 words minimum) focused on a critical engagement with two of the essays discussed in class.
3. A 4000-word research paper on a topic chosen in consultation with the instructor.

If, in the course of writing any of the required work you should make use of the ideas or wording of a consulted source, you must provide documentation to that effect following the guidelines established in the *MLA Handbook* or *Chicago Manual of Style*. If you are unclear as to what requires documentation, consult the *Manual*, the pamphlet on *Originality and Attribution: A Guide for Student Writers at Vassar College*, or myself. Failure to acknowledge sources constitutes a breach of academic integrity and will be referred to the College's Academic Panel. This applies equally to material taken from the worldwide web.

## **Attendance Policy**

Attendance to class meetings is **obligatory**. Absence from class will not constitute a valid excuse for lack of preparedness or late work. Students can keep abreast of course assignments through Blackboard or through contact with fellow students or the instructor. After the first unexcused absence from class, subsequent absences will result in a corresponding reduction of the final grade (see below).

## **Students with Disabilities**

Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities who are registered with the Office of Disability and Support Services. Please schedule an appointment with the instructor early in the semester to discuss any accommodations for this course which have been approved by the Director of Disability and Support Services as indicated in your DSS accommodation letter.

## **Required Texts (available at College Bookstore):**

**Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean**, Edited by M. Fernández Olmos and L. Paravisini-Gebert

**Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction** by M. Fernández Olmos and L. Paravisini-Gebert

***The Autobiography of My Mother*** by Jamaica Kincaid

***Myal*** by Erna Brodber

***The Messenger*** (Mayra Montero)

## Discussion Schedule:

### September

2 Introduction

4 Historical background

Read:

- “Introduction” and “Historical Background” from *Creole Religions*
- Andrés Pérez y Mena’s “Cuban Santería, Haitian Vodun, Puerto Rican Spirituality: A Multiculturalist Inquiry into Syncretism” (Blackboard)

### PART I: SANTERÍA

9 The Belief System

Read:

- “The Orisha Tradition in Cuba: Santería/Regla de Ocha” from *Creole Religions*
- Miguel Barnet’s “La regal de Ocha: The Religious System of Santería” (from *Sacred Possessions*)

11 The Belief System

Read:

- “The Afro-Cuban Religious Traditions of Regla de Palo and the Abakuá Societies” from *Creole Religions*
- Michael Atwood Mason’s “‘I Bow My Head to the Ground’: The Creation of Bodily Experience in a Cuban American Santería Initiation” (Blackboard)

16 Practices and Rituals

Read:

- Eugenio Matibag’s “Ifá and Interpretation” (*Sacred Possessions*)
- Michael Atwood Mason’s “‘The Blood that Runs Through the Veins’: The Creation of Identities and a Client’s Experience of Cuban-American ‘Santería dilogún’ Divination” (Blackboard)

18 Healing Practices

- Lydia Cabrera’s “Black Arts : African folk wisdom and popular medicine in Cuba” (Blackboard)
- Ester Rebeca Shapiro Rok’s “Santería as a Healing Practice in Diaspora Communities: My Cuban Jewish journey with Oshún” (Blackboard)
- Anna Wexler’s “Dolls and Healing in a Santería house” (Blackboard)

23 Interpretations

- José Piedra’s “From Monkey Tales to Cuban Songs: On Signification” (*Sacred Possessions*)

25/30 Representing Santería

Read:

- Mayra Montero’s *The Messenger*

## October

### PART II: HAITIAN VODOU

- 2 Belief System  
Read:  
• “Haitian Vodou” from *Creole Religions*  
• Joan Dayan’s “Vodoun, or the voice of the gods” (*Sacred Possessions*)
- 7 Belief System  
Read:  
• Laennec Hurbon’s “Vodou: A Faith for Individuals, Family, and Community” (Blackboard)  
• Anna Wexler’s “I am Going to See Where My Oungan Is” (*Sacred Possessions*)
- 9 Practices and Rituals  
Read:  
• Katherine Dunham, from *Island Possessed* (Blackboard)
- 14 Healing Practices  
Read:  
• Karen McCarthy Brown’s “Afro-Caribbean Healing: A Haitian Case Study” (Blackboard)  
• “He of the Trees: Nature, Environment, and Creole Religiosities in the Caribbean” (Blackboard)  
**MIDTERM PAPER DUE**
- 16 Representations  
Read:  
• “Women Possessed: Eroticism and Exoticism in the representation of Woman as Zombie” (*Sacred Possessions*)  
• *I Walked with a Zombie* (video)
- 28 Vodou and History  
Read:  
• Joan Dayan’s “Rituals of History” (Blackboard)  
• David Nicholls’ “Politics and Religion in Haiti” (Blackboard)
- 30 Belief System  
Read:  
“Obeah, Myal, and Quimbois” from *Creole Religions*  
George Eaton Simpson’s “The Nine Night Ceremony in Jamaica” (Blackboard)

## November

- 4 Shamanism  
Film:  
*Sugar Cane Alley*
- 6 Representations  
Read:

Alan Richardson's "Romantic Voodoo : Obeah and British culture, 1797-1807"  
from *Sacred Possessions*

Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*

11 *The Autobiography of My Mother*

13 Espiritismo

Read: "Espiritismo" from *Creole Religions*

Mario Núñez Molina's Community Healing among Puerto Ricans: *Espiritismo as a Therapy for the Soul* (Blackboard)

18 Hybrid Espiritismo

Read: Marta Moreno Vega's "Espiritismo in the Puerto Rican Community: A New World Recreation with the Elements of Kongo Ancestor Worship" (Blackboard)

20/25 Rastafarianism

Read: "Rastafarianism" from *Creole Religions*

O'Brien and Carter's "Chant Down Babylon: Freedom of Religion and the Rastafarian Challenge to Majoritarianism" (Blackboard)

## December

2 Bob Marley, Reggae, and Rastafarian Philosophy

Selection of reggae songs

Read: Sheila Kitzinger's "Protest and Mysticism: The Rastafarian Cult of Jamaica" (Blackboard)

4/9 Recap

Read:

Erna Brodber's *Myal*

## Course Evaluation Criteria

10% Class Attendance (Please note that after the second unexcused absence from the class you will forfeit 5 percentage points off your final grade for every subsequent absence).

20% Class participation

20% Brief responses

20% Midterm paper

30% Final paper

**Final paper will be due by 5pm on the second day of final exams.**